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# The Prospect of 'Chindia' as a World Power

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/12/06/the-prospect-of-chindia-as-a-world-power/>

JONATHAN D. JAMES, DEC 6 2019

A significant global development in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has been the rise of several nations hitherto not considered key players in the international scene. The following up and coming nations have recently been grouped respectively as BRIC and BASIC: Brazil, Russia, India, and China (BRIC); and Brazil, South Africa, India, and China (BASIC) (Wilson & Purushothaman, 2003). Noticeably, the two nations featured in both these groupings are China and India. China's and India's meteoric rise to the global arena, and the sheer magnitude of their populations, has led some scholars to assert that there is an 'irresistible' shift of global power toward Asia, dubbing this as the 'Asian Century' (Mahbubani, 2008, p. 43). And some scholars have gone so far as to coin the portmanteau 'Chindia' to signify the ascendancy of these two Asian giants (Ramesh, 2005; Sheth, 2008). In this article, I begin by examining Ramesh's (2005) and Sheth's (2008) definitions of the term *Chindia*. I then proceed to situate Chindia according to classical international relations theory of how global peace and prosperity have been historically attributed to a few strong nations in the world. I then undertake an historical overview of China-India relations, followed by a brief summary of the commonalities and differences between the two nations. Finally, I make an assessment whether Chindia is a dream or a possibility.

### Chindia and Hegemony in International Relations

Sheth (2008) contended that with the rise of China and India, a fusion may take place between these nations. Hence Chindia may usher in a new world order, replacing the USA:

[The] kind of rapid rise to economic supremacy now being witnessed in these two nations has happened but once – in the United States, from roughly 70 years after the Civil War to the end of WW1. It therefore follows that the bursting of China and India into full economic bloom will have global repercussions – political, social, cultural as well as economic. These are expected to be in the same order of magnitude as that of America's hegemony throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century... (p. 5)

Sheth did not imply imperial designs in Chindia rising. However, it was not ruled out because he saw economic power as a steppingstone to political power. Ramesh, (2005, 2014), who coined the term Chindia, argued:

Chindia is not an outdated vision, it is actually what the governments of both countries are carrying forward. It is essential for India to understand China better, and vice versa. There is no reason that India and China should fall victim to those people who see India and China as natural rivals (2014, para. 12)

Both pundits and investors embraced this somewhat fanciful notion of the two largest nations forming an alliance that will spell success and stability to Asia and the world. So how would Chindia fit into the international relations landscape of the world?

Interestingly, Ramesh's and Sheth's predilection of Chindia corresponds with international relations scholars who contend that American hegemony has been declining since the recession of 2007, and project a shift in global wealth, power and influence from West to East – a trend exemplified by China's rapid rise to world power status (Layne, 2012). Apparently, Layne's depiction of US's decline was based on the theoretical perspectives of the classical international relations scholar Parchami (2009), who traced the etymology of the ancient Latin word *Pax* (the Roman goddess of peace) to modern times when the term has come to mean long periods of world peace under the benevolent guidance of a dominant world power. Historically, there have been three such periods: *Pax Romana* (the Roman empire, 27 BCE to 14 CE); *Pax Britannica* (the British Empire, 1815-1914) and *Pax*

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*Americana* (the relative peace brought about by USA and her allies post-1945).

## Historical Overview of China-India Relations

Although China and India emanate from ancient civilizations and share a common border, there is little historical evidence of appreciable partnerships between the two nations (Sidhu & Yuan, 2003). Chinese scholars and priests were known to have visited India to learn more about Buddhism in the first millennium, and this was reciprocated with Indian scholars visiting China between the first and the eleventh centuries (Sen, 2003). Trade has been another reason for interactions between the two nations (Sen, 2003). However, it was colonisation that brought the two together, albeit in negative ways. During the British colonisation of India, the East India Company produced opium that was sold in China, whose objection to the harmfully addictive product led to the ugly Opium Wars between China and Great Britain. The first took place from 1839 to 1842, and the second, between 1856 and 1860. China lost both Opium Wars and its defeat was especially severe because it entailed Hong Kong being surrendered to British control and British citizens granted special commercial privileges (Wang, 2011).

However, a measure of improvement in relations between China and India took place just before the British left India due to their shared anti-imperial sentiments. Following India's independence, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was cordial towards nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek. And even when the Mao Zedong-led communists defeated the nationalists and formed the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, India extended formal recognition to the transformed nation. And Nehru's overtures to the PRC when Zhou Enlai became the Prime Minister in 1949 are noteworthy (Wang, 2011). Nehru's famous slogan '*Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai*' (India and China are brothers) was unprecedented in China-India relations (Wang, 2011). However, this euphoria of brotherly love between the two nations ended rather abruptly in 1950 as a result of their standoff regarding the McMahon Line (the boundary drawn quite arbitrarily in the *Simla Accord* of 1914 to demarcate British India from Tibet). Whereas Britain and Tibet were bound to this new territorial boundary line, China, contested it because it encroached on its territory (Wang, 2011). Hence China broke international protocol when its Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) entered Tibet and claimed sovereignty over the disputed territory that had previously served as a buffer between India and China. Indian officials observed, ironically, 'This was the first time we [Indians] came into direct contact with Han Chinese...we suddenly became neighbours' (Malik cited in Wang, 2011, p. 450).

In 1959, after Tibet's failed revolt against China, the fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tibet's highest spiritual-cum-political leader, fled to India. India's Prime Minister Nehru offered the city of Dharamsala as a location for the exiled Tibetan government – thus adding stress to the already-strained bilateral relations between China and India (Wang, 2011). And in 1962, widespread disagreement and uncertainty about border issues led to military confrontation and a full-scale war on 20 October 1962. The Chinese army in a surprise attack expelled Indian soldiers from the Dhola post in the border's eastern sector. Clearly, India was unprepared for a war of this magnitude and grateful that China called it off in the middle of November of the same year after she gained back her claimed territory; but India essentially lost her national pride (Sidhu & Yuan, 2003). Scholars agree that the 1962 war took its toll and 'cast a long shadow over the Indo-Chinese relationship, and India's defeat...indelibly colored [its] perceptions of China' (Sidhu & Yuan, 2003, p. 15).

China's successful nuclear tests in 1964 deepened Indian misgivings. From 1962 to 1976, China and India were involved in a tense cold war – thawed by an exchange of ambassadors in 1976 (Sidhu & Yuan, 2003). Other testing events for the China-India relations included China's entry into the United Nations in 1971, Indian nuclear tests in 1998, and China's entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001. China's opposition to India obtaining permanency status in the UN Security Council was another point of contention. Hence, ancient allegiance and recent rivalry have provided the historical backdrop to our understanding of contemporary China-India relations.

## Commonalities and Partnerships

Geographically, China and India share a common location in Asia. And they are the two most populous nations in the world, with India predicted to overtake China in population growth before 2050 (Ritchie, 2019). Both nations have a long history and a rich civilisation that dates thousands of years. They also have deep historical

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connections: India is the birthplace of Gautama Buddha (the founder of Buddhism) and the conduit for the amazing spread of Buddhism to China and East Asia where more adherents to Buddha live than in India. Both are members of the BRICS forum, the BASIC group of nations and the G-20 (a grouping of the world's largest advanced and emerging economies) (Petersen & Jungbluth, 2019).

Significantly, both nations share a sense of humiliation over the way they have been treated by Western countries with imperial designs (Vieira & Alden, 2011). Both have adapted aspects of the Westphalian understanding of state sovereignty and non-intervention by upholding a secure world order through laws enforced by their respective political systems (Vieira & Alden, 2011; Wang, 2012). China is currently India's fourth largest export market (Arora & Saxena, 2018) with bilateral trade in 2017 having reached an all-time high of US\$84.44 billion, according to China (Arora & Saxena, 2018). India and China have much in common, but divergences remain, as elaborated in the following section.

## Differences and Obstacles

### *Politics*

China is ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and espouses a political ideology that blends communism with capitalism and pragmatism. India is the world's largest democracy with a parliamentary system and bureaucracy adopted and adapted from the British who colonised the nation for 250 years.

China's political system, despite criticisms of its totalitarianism, has generated extraordinary economic development and reduction in poverty. Its road, rail and other infrastructure is way ahead of that of India, which is bogged down by bureaucracy and deep seated cultural and religious issues (Harris-White, 2012).

### *Language and culture*

Mao Zedong unified the nation by introducing Mandarin as the official language (Karl, 2010). India celebrates its linguistic and cultural diversity because it is home to 1,650 mother tongues, although Hindi is the official language (Mallikarjun, 2004).

China destroyed its old social structures (such as the literati, the landlords) through two revolutions. On the other hand, India has never had a social revolution, and class structures such as the caste system remain part of its social life. Harris-White (2012) has proposed that a semi-feudal social structure is less inclined to adopt a form of capitalism and embark on the reduction of poverty.

China has been influenced by the teachings of Confucius (Page, 2015), which promotes five cardinal relationships (*Wu-lun*): father – son; emperor – subject; husband – wife; older – younger brothers; and friend-to-friend (Chang & Holt, 1991). This is the basis of interpersonal relationships in China today, although the communist ideology dictates life in China and can overrule deeply embedded Confucian ideology when necessary. For example, recently, the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs in the state of Guangzhou issued a notification that the government is giving 'incentives and cash prizes' to anyone who reports on 'illegal religious activities' in the city, such as 'underground community meetings, catechism, or interactions with foreign religious personnel' (Zhicheng, 2019, para. 1). This opens the door for friend to turn against friend, thus undermining the fifth code of mutual piety in Confucian thinking.

Whereas India's Hindu caste system has contributed to its social disparities in education and income, her democratic processes provide some form of protection for the civil liberties of minorities. India is behind China militarily and economically, but Hinduism seems to be more supportive of differences: 'It is the nature of the Hindu religion to be tolerant and, in its own curious way, permissive,' writes British historian Paul Johnson (2004, para. 2).

Through the eyes of a Chinese advisor in a novel, the American travel writer Paul Theroux (1998) gave us a

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glimpse of his understanding of how Chinese culture affects politics:

The philosophy of learning from foreigners was spelled out in the nineteenth century by Feng Gui Fen. He regarded all foreigners as barbarians but said it was necessary to use them...A few barbarians should be employed, and Chinese who are good in using their minds should be selected to receive instruction so that in turn they may teach many craftsmen...we should use the instruments of the barbarians, but not adopt the ways of the barbarians. We should use them so that we can repel them (Theroux, 1988, p. 320)

## *Economics*

China's economy has grown at a faster rate than India's partly because China's manufacturing boom has been based primarily on foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade agreements rather than its encouragement of homegrown entrepreneurship. In 1990 China produced less than 3% of global manufacturing output; this figure now has jumped to nearly 25%: 'China produces about 80% of the world's air-conditioners, 70% of its mobile phones, and 60% of its shoes' (Bacon, 2015, para. 1).

In contrast, India has adopted a policy of encouraging and creating world class domestic companies rather than being the global factory that China is described as (Lomas, 2017). In so doing, India has birthed companies with 'cutting-edge' technology and 'knowledge-based industries' such as *Infosys* and *Wipro* as well as pharmaceutical and biotechnology 'powerhouses' like *Ranbaxy* and *Dr. Reddy's Labs*. (Huang & Khanna, 2003, para. 3). However, China is catching up with the creation of its own competitive companies such as Huawei Technologies, Haier Group and Lenovo Group.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aims to strengthen the CCP's economic leadership through a broad program of infrastructure building throughout China's neighbouring regions. The BRI is clearly President Xi Jinping's jewel in the crown to showcase China's power and economic capabilities to the world. The scale of the project is colossal and includes more than 100 countries, with more expected to join. The project has received praise but also strong criticism, with some calling it 'debt trap diplomacy' (Carminati, 2019, para. 2). An example of this is the case of Hambantota (a town in the Southern province of Sri Lanka), where the local 'government was forced to sign the port away on a 99-year lease after failing to repay Chinese loans' (Carminati, 2019).

This criticism has been strongly contested by the Chinese government and its tightly controlled media; however, unfavourable news reports worldwide have induced many to distrust the Chinese government's motives. Overall, the rhetoric and mixed signals about BRI have been counterproductive and, according to Carminati: 'A reassessment of how China wants to present itself to the world should come sooner than later, as it takes a long time to build a trustworthy reputation and much less time to tarnish it. China's spotlight is now; how long it will last is yet to be determined' (Carminati, 2019, para. 10).

India's Look East policy, which later became the Act East Policy under Prime Minister Modi, is an initiative to develop strategic economic relations with the nations of South East Asia commensurate with China's BRI, although India's reactive policy is less extensive than China's. Time will tell whether these two initiatives will collide with each other or converge to create stability.

## *Defence and International Relations*

India has looked more to the USA in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century for a new strategic military alliance, which is often described by US scholars as a 'healthy relationship' (Ganguly & Scobell, 2005, pp. 37–43). Today's US-India ties can be understood by the sentiments outlined in a speech given by Senator John F. Kennedy in 1959, just before he became President of the United States:

No struggle in the world today deserves more of our time and attention than that which now grips the attention of all Asia. I am not referring to the unhappy tide of events in Tibet...I am referring to another struggle equally fierce but less obvious – less in the headlines but far more significant in the long run. And that is the struggle between

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India and China for leadership of the East, for the respect of all Asia, for the opportunity to demonstrate whose way of life is the better (John F Kennedy Website, para. 2)

Senator Kennedy's sentiments shaped US foreign policy under his administration and in successive US administrations. The USA's 'pivoting to Asia' policy seemed designed to strategically 'rebalance' the Asia Pacific region, in keeping with its perception of China as a threat. According to a Chinese scholar, one of the consequences of the strong US – India partnership was India's increasing boldness in its stand on its border issues with China especially in the Aksai Chin, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh regions (Zhang Li, 2009).

On the other hand, China's ties with Pakistan – an arch enemy of India – appeared to counterbalance the US-India alliance in South Asia. And the 'cat and mouse' game has continued with China bypassing India and the US to build an energy corridor from Balouchistan (Pakistan) to Karakorum (Mongolia), despite Pakistan's notorious instability. However, the implementation of this corridor has encountered several difficulties (Chen, 2009). These include the politically tenuous situation in neighbouring Afghanistan and Iran as well as domestic issues in Pakistan (Hassain, 2017).

Then there is the Taiwan factor (China considers Taiwan part of her territory) in the power balance struggle between China and India. India is ranked among the high-priority countries in Taiwan's new South-bound policy that focuses on strengthening ties with eighteen South-East and South-Asian countries (Singh, 2019). Presumably, Taiwan's engagement with India is a display of sovereignty and resistance in the face of pressure from the Chinese mainland (Chen, 2015).

Hence the East Asian partnerships with the respective two giants, and with the US, have added to the complexity of the region. From the Chinese perspective, the multi-lateral military and trade partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region between the USA, Japan, India, Australia and other allies is an extension of the long-standing policy of the strategic containment of China (Sun Yang, 2016). And from the viewpoint of the US and its allies the defence spending by China justifies this policy of containment. India's military expenditure per capita was US\$9.7 billion in 1991 and US\$38.1 billion in 2013, compared to China's US\$8.7 billion in 1991 and US\$138 billion in 2013 (SIPRI Military Expenditure Website).

## *Maritime plans*

According to Lee (2002), the breakup of the Soviet Union eased China's anxiety of a land war and enabled it to redirect its resources into modernising its naval fleet and expanding its maritime diplomacy around the globe. And in conjunction with this development, China has put the world on notice of its territorial claims in the Spratly and Diaoyutui (Senkaku) Islands and the South China Sea (Lee, 2002).

India perceives China's advancements in Asia as a threat to its security at sea and on land, particularly since China has developed close ties with Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Meanwhile, China is anxious about India's chosen interests in East Asia.

## *Borders*

Border issues between China and India are a nagging problem as the two bicker over their shared 4,056 km frontier. Bilateral discussions have been ongoing for decades and will likely continue. Discussions of late, however, have been accompanied by a glimmer of hope in the form of the leaders' firm pledge to find a peaceful end to the issue (Economic Times Website, 2019).

## **Analysis**

China's consuming ambition to be respected in the international sphere in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (and into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century), can be attributed to historical reasons. China's theory of foreign relations started in pre-modern days, when it was considered the Middle Kingdom (Shambaugh, 2005), and the centre of the civilised

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world. But the country's defeat in the Opium Wars with Britain and subsequent clashes with Japan have been deeply humiliating. Hence China's endeavour to 'rejuvenate' and be returned to its rightful status as a superpower.

Though not as pronounced, India also has strong political ambitions. However, at the risk of oversimplification, China appears to be the instigator and leader, India the follower and reactor. This was illustrated by China entering Indian territory to claim back its disputed border in 1962, and India reacting to this invasion; also, with China joining the nuclear arms 'club' in 1964 and India following suit in 1998.

Economically, the two nations complement each other, with China providing the hardware (factories and infrastructure) and India, significant parts of the software (e.g. IT, business outsourcing and financial services). On paper this seems like the potential synergy for some form of Chindia. However, the relationship between the two is far too complex and the differences too weighty to inspire contemplation of a strong alliance in the immediate future. Both will continue to grow separately and restrict any collaboration to utilitarian and pragmatic purposes.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to give an historical and futurist overview of the political and economic relationship between China and India. Within the first half of this century, these two rising giants have emerged simultaneously, and it now seems certain that they will impact on the dynamics of the US hegemonic framework – but how exactly remains to be seen. While making their mark on the world scene, China and India must constantly watch each other's backs, mindful of their history of wars, border issues, rivalry, and essential differences. 'Different beds, same dreams' a description used by Ramesh (2005) may be a useful analogy for China and India today. Both countries have similar ambitions and are poised to become world economic power houses.

In the short-term, the containment of China will be the major policy objective for the US and her allies together with India. However, in the long term, India and China may develop a less confrontative, more nuanced and productive relationship. The level of economic cooperation between the two nations is an encouraging sign, but until more deep-seated change occurs, the elephant and the dragon will engage ever so cautiously. And, while the speculation about Chindia may continue, one thing is certain: *Pax Americana* is under notice and the current unilateral model of international relations (when one nation is the major power) seems destined to be replaced by a multi-polar model, with China and India as key players in the emerging geopolitical architecture of our world.

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